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SUBJECT: SADRISTS EXTEND HAND AS PLOT AGAINST JAFARI
DEVELOPS

Classified By: Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad for reasons 1.4 (B) and (D).

11. (S) SUMMARY: A Sadrist leader presented a flexible approach to government negotiations in a February 19 conversation with the Ambassador, but, in a subsequent meeting, Ayad Allawi and Kurdistan President Masud Barzani made clear that they want to continue to develop plans to upend Jafari's nomination. The Sadrist official, Baha al-Araji, told the Ambassador that his group has no red line against Allawi, prefers technocrats in the cabinet, and would even accept a national security council provided it is consultative and has no executive authority. At a subsequent meeting the same day with the Ambassador, Allawi and Barzani told the Ambassador that they find those offers unconvincing. They said they plan to decide names of alternate candidates for the top government posts in consultation with SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim. Hakim, Allawi said, promised him that he would cooperate in private to forge an alternative government. In a separate later meeting with the Ambassador, Tawafuq leader Khalaf al-Ayan said he is ready for an alliance with SCIRI but concerned that ongoing disputes over de-Ba'athification, federalism, and the constitution might make that impossible. END SUMMARY.

Softer Line from the Sadrists

12. (C) In a February 19 meeting with Ambassador, Sadrist negotiator Baha al-Araji dismissed the current hardline Shia coalition stance on government formation as merely a negotiating tactic. Araji said he objects to Allawi because Allawi waged a war against the Mahdi Army and allegedly was personally responsible for the destruction of Araji's house and the arrest of his brother. Araji further explained that the Sadrists are objecting to a national security council because it would appear to undermine Iraq's democratic institutions. Araji said the Sadrists also are driven by a fear that growing Kurdish power in the central government and in Kurdistan could lead to secession. The Sadrists see flaws in Jafari's management but are confident in his piety and morality, Araji said. Adil Abd al-Mahdi, Araji contrasted, is a fine man crippled by a subservient relationship with SCIRI and a potentially treacherous partnership with the Kurds.

13. (S) Ambassador warned that a Sadrist hardline stance could alienate the groups outside the Shia coalition and drive them to nominate a prime ministerial candidate of their own. That prospect seemed to moderate Araji's tone. He subsequently said that the Sadrists support a Sunni Arab for the presidency but would understand if Talabani had to stay. Araji then said he could see working "hand-in-hand" with Allawi if Iraq needs it. The Sadrists even would support a national security council if it were labeled "consultative"

or "coordinating," Arajji added. The Sadrists want a technocratic cabinet, he continued, even if it means the rise of ministers from outside their ranks. According to Arajji, the Sadrists want an independent body to study hiring practices in the Ministries of Interior and Defense because SCIRI members had been promoted extensively while Sadrists had been left behind.

Building Bridges to Muqtada

14. (S) Ambassador asserted that a letter expressing those positions would build bridges and speed up the negotiations, and Arajji pledged to draft one and supply a copy to the USG within the next few days. Arajji said the Sadrists would moderate their politics if other Iraqi parties work to bring them in rather than keep them out. The 30 Sadrists in parliament, Arajji suggested, ought to be used as guarantors for 10 detainees each, allowing the Coalition to free some 300 Sadrists now in MNF-I custody.

15. (C) Arajji denied that the Sadrists have any link to advanced weapons being used in Iraq, describing the Mahdi Army as an employment project more than a militia. He alleged that other groups put on the traditional all-black Mahdi Army garb and carry out attacks to divert the blame to the Sadrists. "Give me 200,000 jobs and I'll end this thing you call the Mahdi Army," he said. Arajji denied allegations that the Sadrists are tied to Iran or are running sharia courts in Baghdad. According to Arajji, the late Muhammad Sadiq al-Sadr was never linked to Hizballah or Khamenei. Sharia courts are a vestige of religious expression from a time of religious persecution during the Saddam era, and Muqtada has banned their use now, Arajji claimed. When word

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reached Muqtada of one such court, Arajji said (apparently trying to be reassuring), Muqtada threatened to shut it down or kill the "court officials" if they resist.

Allawi and Barzani Work to Draw SCIRI Out of Iran's Embrace

16. (C) At a separate February 19 meeting with the Ambassador, Allawi and Barzani continued discussions aimed at keeping the Sadrists out of positions of influence in Iraq's next government. Both insisted that the Sadrists are a weapon in the hands of the Iranians. Allawi said SCIRI leader Abd al-Aziz al-Hakim had told him in a lengthy 3-hour conversation the previous day that Iran appears to be changing course in Iraq. Allawi said Hakim now feels threatened by Iran and does not even trust his own staff on the subject, at one point dismissing his guards from the room during the conversation because of doubts about their loyalty. According to Allawi, Hakim might be ready to shift his loyalties to the U.S. but doubts the U.S. commitment to his group and needs to find a way to build his position regionally. Sadr's recent trip across the Middle East demonstrated an emerging effort to upstage and then crush SCIRI, Hakim reportedly assessed. Allawi said that even with these fears, Hakim wondered whether the U.S. also might be behind such a conspiracy against his group, and he does not want to risk dropping Iranian backing and accepting U.S. support only to find himself abandoned "in the middle of the road." Allawi said he told Hakim that he would work to strengthen SCIRI with the Saudis and the UAE.

17. (S) Barzani, who planned a separate meeting with Hakim, told the Ambassador that, once the Sadrists are in power, they are sure to turn on the Hakim family to settle the long-running competition between them for authority in Najaf. Barzani said he would expect the Sadrists to pursue that goal ruthlessly, even by wiping out Hakim's children. Barzani said Hakim knows the magnitude of the threat and

needs to be helped out of his rut. The problem, Barzani said, is that the Badr Organization is more directly tied to Iran than SCIRI, and Hakim may not be able to trust that entire half of his parliamentary bloc. Both men assessed that Hakim would not break the Shia coalition since after all he was its leader. They decided instead to work with him in private in the coming days to settle on a menu of nominees for all top government jobs. They planned to compare notes again at Talabani's residence on February 20.

18. (S) In a separate later meeting with the Ambassador, Tawafuq leader Khalaf al-Ayan said that he is ready for an alliance with SCIRI but is concerned that ongoing disputes over de-Ba'athification, federalism, and the constitution might make that impossible. Ambassador told him that Hakim might prove more ready to work out compromises on these issues than expected and urged al-Ayan to seek out common ground. Al-Ayan said he fully supports the idea of a National Salvation Front and does not seek a set number of ministries for the Tawafuq Front. If all sides can agree on the right programs and principles, Al-Ayan said, he thinks a unity government will be achievable.

KHALILZAD